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ABSTRACT

Following mention of the literature and pioneers in the field of at-risk family involvement in education, this document discusses the history of the term "at risk" and its use, identification of children at risk, and the two major risk factors: poverty and minority status. The important connections and assets missing from the at-risk child's world are examined as well as how parent involvement can help to bridge the gap between child and school, change attitudes and expectations, and increase the similarity between home and school settings. Also discussed are the benefits parental involvement holds for children, teachers, schools, and the parents themselves; an adaptation of Joyce Epstein's forms of parent involvement; and a variety of proposed entry levels and activities for at-risk families. The necessity and forms of school initiative in involving at-risk parents are explored and related suggestions are offered. The nature and origin of barriers and misunderstandings between parents and teachers are examined in detail with emphasis on existing stereotypes. Last, new beliefs and principles that provide a foundation for successful programs for at-risk families are outlined. An appendix provides information about eight organizations concerned with at-risk families. (49 references) (CLA)

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TRENDS & ISSUES

A series of papers highlighting recent developments in research and practice in educational management

Involving the Families of At-Risk Youth in the Educational Process

Lynn Balster Liontos

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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January 1991

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Foreword

The benefits of parent involvement in education are now well known. When families become involved in their children's education, the children's academic achievement rises and their motivation, behavior, and attendance improve. Other benefits accrue to the parents themselves and to teachers and the school.

For these reasons, educators in many school systems today are renewing their efforts to reach out to parents. New books and articles on parent involvement appear daily, and new programs are begun. But as we survey all this activity, our attention in the end comes to rest on a sobering irony: most parent involvement programs aren't reaching the parents who need it most—those whose children are most likely to fail or drop out.

In values, expectations, and environment, most schools are reflections of middle-class families. To communicate with and involve parents who are poor, nonwhite, or speak a language other than English, educators must be able to bridge the cultural gap.

To help educators meet the challenge of involving parents and extended families of at-risk children, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management is pleased to offer this fifth issue of the Trends and Issues series. The author, Lynn Balster Liontos, is a research analyst and writer who has been commissioned by the Clearinghouse to write several syntheses of literature on parent involvement, collaboration between schools and social services, and at-risk students.

We are grateful for the contribution of Don Davies, president of the Institute for Responsive Education and codirector of the new National Research Center on Families, Communities, and Children's Learning, for his critique of a draft of this paper.

Philip K. Piele
Professor and Director

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Introduction

"I never see the parents I need to see," more than one teacher has complained, calling them hard-to-reach or saying they don't care about their children's education.

These are the parents of children at risk—at risk of failing, of dropping out, of having what in today's world accounts for no future at all.

And it's true that, as a rule, these parents aren't involved much with the schools, if at all. The Carnegie urban-schools study tells of a high school in New Orleans, which, like others in the city, requires parents to pick up their children's report cards. At one particular school, located in a low income area, 70 percent of the cards remained unclaimed two months after the marking period (M. Sandra Reeves 1988).

A first-grade teacher in Cleveland told the Carnegie researchers:

> You send notices home, there's no response. You ask parents to come to conferences, they don't come. You send homework home, you can see that parents aren't paying attention to it. They aren't helping their kids. (Reeves)

Is this true? Well, yes and no. Many of them simply don't know *how* to help their kids. But they do care. Grace Godinez, interpreter for the Northwest Regional Parent Involvement Project, says, "The principal and the teachers—I think they are more aware of us now....I think for awhile they thought we didn't care, that we didn't have the same concerns and hopes for our children. Now they know that we do" (Tony Kneidek 1990).

This report will attempt to explore the reasons why these parents traditionally haven't been involved with their children's schooling. These are children who have the most, perhaps, to gain from parent and family involvement. There are reasons why schools haven't done their part either.

It may not be easy to reach parents. In fact, most project coordinators working with "at-risk" families report that it takes a great deal of time, creativity, patience, and commitment. But there's no alternative when we consider that these children are our future.

Literature on At-Risk Family Involvement

The literature that targets at-risk family involvement is sparse.

Ironically enough, in most publications on family involvement, I often found only a paragraph or two that talked directly about at-risk parents, and almost nothing about the process of reaching them. It is ironic because many of the research studies were carried out in inner-city schools where the populations are largely poor and minorities. Yet the literature on parental involvement—which is abundant—is filled chiefly with prescriptions or ideas that apply almost strictly to middle-class parents and families.

Reasons for This Lack

Why should this be? Part of it may simply be tradition. Our schools have traditionally been part and parcel of the middle-class value system, and teachers are used to dealing with middle-class behavior and expectations. Also, much of the evaluation of parent involvement is short-term, often in doctoral dissertations with no followup, where at-risk families and other cultures are simply part of a larger educational package. Finally, many programs that are working with at-risk families may not publicize their efforts in papers or journals.

Cultural Differences

To date, say Diana T. Slaughter and Valerie Shahariw Kuehne (1987-88), we've paid little attention to cultural differences in parent involvement. We know little about how different subcultures and groups adapt to diverse family involve-

ment programs. As John Ogbu, anthropology professor at Berkeley, has said about the Accelerated Schools for students (Louis Freedberg 1989): You don't just lump all the kids together who are at risk and provide the same program for them. Ogbu claims that to be effective the Accelerated approach must carefully differentiate between student groups. My review of the research suggests that the same principle applies to at-risk families and parent involvement programs.

Considering the fact that increasing proportions of our children will be nonwhite or nonmainstream by the twenty-first century, it would be practical to hasten the process of learning more about at-risk families and how to involve different subgroups in our schools.

Pioneers

I am indebted to three pioneers on this path, each of whom has contributed much to my attempts to fit together pieces of the puzzle of how to work with at-risk families.

Don Davies

Don Davies of the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) in Boston in his research and with his project, Schools Reaching Out (SRO), has been working exclusively with low-income families. His two lab schools in New York and Boston have been grappling with putting into practice what his research in three countries has indicated as possible directions for working with at-risk families. The assumptions that underlie all his work—and that are included in this report as well—must be the foundation for involving at-risk families with schools, if the undertaking is to succeed.

James Comer

James Comer, professor of psychiatry at Yale University, who established the experimental School Development Program (SDP) in New Haven, has also been working largely with lower-income families and students. He has a particular interest in black families.

His work on empowerment, which includes involving families in the actual decision-making and governance of SDP schools, stands out. Most importantly, SDP schools work; they are successful and have been replicated in about 100 schools around the country. And parent involvement in decision-making is a key element. Comer's work, because it involves actual functioning schools and deals with a form of the parental involvement process that many writers only give lip service to, has also been very useful to me.

Hispanic Policy Development Project (HPDP)

The Hispanic Policy Development Project (HPDP) is the only detailed source on the process of actually recruiting at-risk parents. HPDP sponsored various projects involving different ways of attempting to work with Hispanic families, some of which worked and some didn't. The result was the publication, *Together Is Better: Building Strong Partnerships Between Schools and Hispanic Parents* (Siobhan Nicolau and Carmen Lydia Ramos 1990).

If each culture, at least, and perhaps other at-risk groups, such as teenage mothers and single parents, went through a similar process, resulting in a similar publication, we'd certainly be further ahead in understanding how to work with different at-risk groups.

While Hispanics have their own particular history, lifestyle, and values, it is also true that many ideas, concepts, examples, and conclusions that worked for them can be adapted and apply to other poor or minority groups.

Overview of Chapters

The following thumbnail sketches of each chapter will help you to anticipate themes that this report addresses.

Chapter 1. Who Is at Risk

Who's at risk? To find out, a brief history of the term and how it's traditionally been used is provided, followed by an examination of how to identify children at risk and the two major risk factors: poverty and minority status. Outlined in

this section is what has happened with our "bottom half" and what we can expect if nothing is done for them.

Chapter 2. Why at-Risk Kids Especially Need Family Involvement

This chapter looks at the important connections and assets missing in an at-risk child's world. I also discuss how parent involvement can help by bridging the gap, changing attitudes and expectations, and making home and school settings more like each other so that there is consensus in the child's world. The importance of the link to the child through his or her parents is emphasized.

Chapter 3. Benefits of Family Involvement

In this chapter, the benefits of parent involvement for children, parents, teachers, and schools are briefly noted, with a special emphasis on what at-risk parents themselves gain from it (which is very important for their children).

Chapter 4. What Works: Forms of Parent Involvement

It has been confirmed that at-risk families have little contact with the schools. Why not? For one thing, traditional methods do not work, which is tied in with the history of poor and minority groups within the school system, along with other barriers. This chapter focuses on an adaptation of Joyce Epstein's forms of parent involvement, detailing each along with the goals for at-risk families. The chapter ends with two authorities proposing a variety of entry levels and activities for at-risk families.

Chapter 5. Schools Must Take the Initiative

This chapter shows why at-risk parents can't take the initiative in reaching out to schools—and therefore why schools must take not only that first step, but perhaps use aggresive outreach for ethnic and lower-income families. The forms school initiative can take are explored and suggestions are proposed for what schools need to do. Most at-risk families *will* respond to schools' and teachers' initiatives.

Chapter 6. Barriers and Misunderstandings

Barriers and misunderstandings are examined in detail for both sides—parents and teachers. Answers are sought for why obstacles exist and where they come from. The chapter emphasizes that stereotypes are present for both groups and that at-risk parents and educators each play a part.

Chapter 7. Overcoming Barriers: New Beliefs and Principles

To help educators overcome the barriers and misunderstandings listed in chapter 6, this chapter looks at new beliefs and principles that provide a foundation for successful programs for at-risk families.

Conclusion

Here's a look at the changes needed, especially organizationally, and at the results of some of the projects cited in the Hispanic Policy Development Project's publication (Siobhan Nicolau and Carmen Lydia Ramos 1990). Is it worth it? The Hispanic projects suggest a resounding yes.

Who This Report Is For

This report is for everyone who works with parents in the schools—or who intend to—and have populations of at-risk students and families. It also might be helpful to independent parent and citizen organizations interested in involving parents and communities with the schools.

At-risk families need special attention. This report explores some of the background information needed to involve them, including a definition of who's at risk and why, and what makes at-risk families so vulnerable. A major chapter is devoted to barriers that stand in the way of

reaching at-risk families, and a subsequent chapter focuses on how we can overcome them by replacing old beliefs and principles with new ones.

Commitment—the key to starting and running a successful parent involvement program for at-risk families—begins at the top. So school board members, superintendents, principals, and other administrative staff might be particularly interested in this report, including chapter 5 on why schools must take the initiative. If you have doubts as to who your at-risk families are or why they need to be involved with the schools, read chapters 1 and 2.

If you're a project coordinator or have responsibility for parent involvement, or if you're a teacher who wonders why you've had trouble reaching at-risk families, you might read chapters 6 and 7 in particular. And pay attention to the forms of involvement—as they relate to at-risk parents—in chapter 4.

Nothing works for everyone, but hopefully educators concerned with at-risk families will find something in this report that is applicable to their own situation.

Good luck! What you do—or don't do—with at-risk families and the schools has an important bearing on the future for all of us.

Who Is at Risk

First, a word about the term *family involvement*. I prefer it to "parent involvement" because with changing demographics, different cultures, and the many forms of family life today, a child is often under the care of the extended family. Sometimes stepparents, noncustodial parents, and grandparents have primary care for a child. However, since "parent involvement" is the term most often used, both will appear here.

Definition of 'At Risk'

The term *at risk* has become a cliche and unfortunately is used both as a description and a prediction. As Walter Hathaway, research director for the Portland, Oregon, schools, notes, the term has virtually become "a verbal dumping ground" for a variety of ills, some of them educational, some of them personal or related to society (M. Sandra Reeves 1988).

The history of the term is interesting. "High risk" has been in use only since 1980. But by 1987 ERIC was using "at risk" to refer, apparently, to school and academic failure, potential dropouts, the educationally disadvantaged, and underachievement.

The term itself appears to have been coined, says Reeves, by the Boston Coalition of Advocates for Students in their 1985 report *Barriers to Excellence: Our Children At Risk*, deliberately titled in reference to the report *A Nation At Risk*. Until the Boston Coalition's report, no one had suggested that it was the students—our children—who might be at risk, rather than the nation.

Actually, most of our children are "at risk" one time or another. "In our transitional society, with extremely high rates of family dissolution, mental health problems, substance abuse, and adolescent pregnancy, few children are risk free," says the report on the New York Education Commissioner's Task Force on the Education of Children and Youth At-Risk (New York State Department of Education 1988). Yet the report agrees that certain children are in critical need of social intervention.

At-risk children are not defined solely by low income or minority status. Even divorce, which may seem so commonplace today, can interfere with a child's academic and social success at school. James Comer comments that "given increasing divorce rates, the growing numbers of single-parent families and families in which both parents work, and the general complexity of modern life, even children of well-educated middle-class parents can come to school unprepared because of the stress their families are undergoing" (Lynn Olson 1990).

In spite of this broad use of the term, this paper limits *at risk*, for the most part, to the way it has been traditionally used—to apply to the poor, who are also often minorities, as well as to families of other cultures. The bottom line, then, for most at-risk families is poverty.

Spotting At-Risk Children

How do you identify children at risk? They are those who show persistent patterns of underachievement and patterns of social maladjustment, says Kenneth Kamminger (1988):

> Not only are these children failing in schoolwork, they also frequently are behavior problems in the classroom or are passive and withdrawn in interactions. The behavior correlates of these underachievers have a common underlying theme, that is, the child is unmotivated or too distracted to succeed in school.

These signs can be seen alarmingly early. One study showed that patterns of underachievement identified in third grade were significantly correlated with dropping out in high school (Kamminger). In fact, many children are at risk even before they begin school, given their economic and family situations. "Growing up poor or in a single-parent family or with parents who themselves are high school dropouts increases the

likelihood that children will have difficulties with schooling," states the Report of the Commissioner's Task Force.

The educational needs of children cannot be separated from their social needs, maintain many experts. Urban families (and many rural ones as well) are often faced with multiple problems: lack of time, energy, and money; inadequate housing and schools; lack of community support; difficult family relations; innumerable social problems; and barriers related to race, class, culture, and language. "High risk" families are those seriously at risk with multiple problems.

Poverty: The Bottom Line

In a time of changing demographics and community needs, poverty is on the increase—and more children are at risk than ever.

The National Policy Institute confirms the link between poverty and school failure, saying that socioeconomic level has a far greater bearing on dropout rates than race (Reeves).

Yet those at risk are likely to be members of a minority racial group. Almost half of all black children under eighteen are poor, says Judith E. Jones (1989), and almost 40 percent of Hispanic children in this age group are also. In Texas alone, 85 percent of the children living in poverty are black and Hispanic. In fact, there are thirteen million poor children in this country and many more that could be considered at risk (Jones). Or looked at in another way, one out of every five children lives in poverty, and the rate is twice as high among blacks and Hispanics (Olson).

The term *poverty* does not apply to a parent losing a job for a short time in a middle-class neighborhood. Martin Orland, a research specialist in the U.S. Education Department, considers "intense" poverty as (1) being poor over long periods of time and (2) attending school in areas with high concentrations of the poor (Reeves).

For each year that a child lives in poverty, Orland has found that the likelihood of falling behind his or her expected grade level increases by 2 percent. Thus a child whose family has been mired in poverty for ten years is 20 percent more likely to do badly in school than a child who is poor for only a year (Reeves).

If that same child also attends a school with a high concentration of poor students, his statistical chances of school failure strikingly increase. In Orland's research, the percentage of low achievers in schools with relatively little poverty was 11.9 percent; it jumped to 23.9 percent in schools with moderate rates of poverty; and to 47.5 percent in schools with the highest poverty rates (Reeves).

Minorities: A Second Factor

It isn't just poverty that puts children at risk. As a University of California researcher observed, an important cause of the high incidence of academic failure is the fact that the preparation for learning that children receive at home is inadequate or may differ fundamentally from what the schools expect (Jones).

The U.S. is not only increasingly multiethnic but also multilingual. Jones reports that forty languages, including dialects, are spoken in the Los Angeles school district. Too often we've ignored language and cultural differences. If language development is the key to learning, how can children who cannot speak English—and who may have delayed language development in their own language—learn? And how can educators teach?

The national minority dropout rate is astounding, says Jones, with 30 percent of high school students dropping out before they graduate. In Texas, for example, the dropout rate is 45 percent for Hispanics and 14 percent for blacks.

"The paradox, of course," says Jones, "is that these minority groups, on whom this nation's future economy depends, are the groups that often experience the most difficult life circumstances and obtain the least educational preparation."

Parental Involvement and Our Bottom Half

The Japanese, says Reeves, claim to have the best bottom 50 percent in the world and thus achieve their extremely high average level of performance by seeing that their weakest students do well. American school reform, however, was launched with rhetoric on excellence that didn't

take into account the bottom half.

The phenomena is called "the second achievement gap." According to Reeves, the gap is a domestic one "between the bottom scorers and the top scorers, between minorities and nonminorities, and between the poor and nonpoor." The great danger, fears Don Davies (1989), is that of having a two-tiered society: one affluent, well-educated and optimistic; the other poor, increasingly isolated, badly educated, and despairing.

Most parents of low socioeconomic status have little or no contact with the schools, Davies (1988) points out, even though they need it the most.

> However, most attempts at parent involvement attract, and are most accessible to middle-class parents. If only middle-class parents are substantially involved, the gaps between children from low socio-economic backgrounds and other children may grow greater rather than smaller. (Davies 1988)

The high rates of failure of at-risk children and the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged amount to a national crisis, reports Reeves—socially, economically, and politically.

Without substantial improvements in the way all children are taught—especially those at the "social margins"—we can expect a future that includes a lowered standard of living, fewer government services, intensified class divisions, a weakened democratic process, and lost human potential (Reeves).

Why At-Risk Children Especially Need Family Involvement

Parental involvement has been shown to be helpful in school achievement and behavior for all children. However, the ones in the bottom half—the ones doing poorest—need it most. Why? What is there about at-risk children that makes family involvement especially beneficial?

Bridging the Gap

The main reason why parental involvement with the schools is so important for at-risk children is that the home and school worlds of these children are so different. This is unlike children from middle-class homes who experience school as similar in values, expectations, and environment to their own homes and families.

When children live in two worlds, or when school and home are "worlds apart," as Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1978) has put it,

> children cannot be expected to bridge the gaps and overcome the confusion of who to learn from. The predictable consequence in such situations is that children usually embrace the familiar home culture and reject the unfamiliar school culture, including its academic components and goals. (Muriel Hamilton-Lee 1988)

The Importance of Human and Social Capital

Some of us may not be able to imagine how unlike these two worlds really are for these children—how vast the difference is between home and school, particularly for low-income and minority children. Let us consider the terms *human capital* and *social capital*—terms that are frequently used by educators today. If we take away the jargon, we can see how they apply to at-risk children's lives.

Resources

Capital is simply an asset or advantage. Human capital, then, as defined by Comer (1987-88), is "the development of skills and capabilities in individuals." Most commonly, though, it's used to refer to the parents' educational background. Or more accurately, it is the resources that parents possess, primarily represented by their educational background, but also by their economic and social status.

Interaction

Social capital, on the other hand, is simply the relationships and interactions that take place between people. We might think of it as links and networks, as well as the kind of communication that occurs between parents and children, for instance.

In at-risk families, often both kinds of advantages are missing. A child's parents may not have finished high school or may have little educational training. These deficits, however, may or may not contribute to the child's failure at school, depending on what happens in the relationships within the family, or even within the community that the family lives in. A family that has few educational advantages may make up for this by the way the family and children relate to each other.

One way to help restore the social capital for these families is for the parents to become involved with their children's schools and teachers. For one thing, it's important because it helps bridge the gap between home and school for the child. It also helps children function in a school setting where shared goals and values develop—that is, where the children's teachers are not expecting something different of them than their families are.

Attitudes and Expectations

Suzanne Ziegler (1987) draws on research from Joyce Epstein and Anne Henderson to explain the gap in school achievement so often found between working-class and middle-class children. She attributes this to substantial differences in attitudes and expectations in child-parent patterns and in parent-school interactions.

For instance, Epstein (1986) says that students gain in personal and academic development "if their families emphasize schools, let the children know they do, and do so continually over the school years."

Henderson (1981) also says that when parents show a strong interest in their children's schooling, "they promote the development of attitudes and expectations that are a key to achievement, attitudes that are more a product of how the family interacts than of its social class or income."

But what happens when schools discourage parents from taking an interest, or treat them as powerless or unimportant, which happens so often with at-risk parents? Obviously, by doing this, schools promote the development of attitudes in the parents that are passed on to their children—and that inhibit achievement. What usually is communicated is that school isn't important. And if school isn't important, why try to do well in school?

What Schools Can Do

Lily Wong Fillmore's work with language minority children attributes the scholastic failure of many working-class white and minority background children to "a poor match between the experiences of the home and those of the school" (The Council of Chief State School Officers 1989). She calls for:

1. Better communication between home and school regarding children's preparation for school
2. Greater accommodation to the cultural patterns of students and how lessons are presented
3. More attention paid to the social environment of the classroom and the relationships between students and teachers

All of the above can be facilitated by involving at-risk families with the schools.

Over and over experts who work with these children emphasize that the connections between schools and at-risk families must be increased. They recommend also that schools become more decentralized and caring. But obviously, there's a desperate need for work on decreasing the gap between home and schools for these children and their families.

Settings

Another way to look at this problem is through the use of the word *settings*. Ziegler suggests that it may be particularly important for teachers to communicate with the parents of at-risk children so that parents and teachers understand each other's settings and expectations, "and learn how to be mutually supportive of the student, which may include some modification of both settings."

Both settings *can* be changed or altered: school can become more home-like and home can have a school-like component, so that the two worlds move closer together for the at-risk student. Bringing parent volunteers in the schools, for example, is one way to make schools more home-like. Home learning, on the other hand, is a way to bring school into the home. "When it is successful," says Ziegler, "changes occur at home *and* at school, so that the two environments become more similar and familiar to the children."

Parents Are the Link to the Child

Yet another way to describe this desired state is school settings that are family-like and family settings that are school-like. The latter happens when parents encourage intellectual development, such as through reading, discussions, approval of school work, respect for children's efforts, and provision of a quiet space.

At-risk parents can be taught how to do all these things. Likewise, schools that treat children as unique make them feel part of the school, as a family would do. A sense of belonging, especially for black children, has been found to be important for these students.

The ideal link to the child is through his or her parents, Ziegler points out, as they are the persons with whom she has a primary relationship:

> When the child sees her parent visit the class, talk to the teacher, or receive a personal note from the teacher which is read to the child, the likelihood increases that the child will feel that her two worlds overlap and that she is at home in both. The positive impact of this kind of relationship, it is posited, is strongest for those with the least experience of it—the young and minorities, for example. (Zeigler 1987)

Providing Support

When schools are involved in providing support to at-risk families, they often are able to reconnect many at-risk youth and their parents to values and activities that society takes for granted. By incorporating family support and education activities into the school site as part of parent involvement programs, schools are helping to develop the knowledge and attitudes these parents impart to their children (human capital).

"Researchers suggest that human capital is potentially more important for educational success than material capital," says the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). "Hence, educators must work to assure that all children have both schools and parents who are able to instruct them well."

However, when families are weak and the human capital scarce, James S. Coleman (1987) suggests that schools are more effective if they can draw on the social resources of the surrounding community—which requires collaboration with other agencies in the neighborhood and larger community. But it can pay off with benefits for everyone: children, families, schools, and the community.

Benefits of Family Involvement

Everyone benefits from parent and family involvement in the schools: kids, parents, teachers, schools, and the community. For at-risk children and families, there's a lot to gain.

The benefits of parent involvement have been widely reported, and some are briefly listed here. For at-risk children, one of the most important things that happens with family involvement is the benefits their *parents* receive (which in turn affect them and their siblings).

For Children

Research has pointed out the negative effects of not having parents and families involved with the schools—the gap that at-risk children experience, for instance, and the often resulting failure of children at school.

Substantial research, however, links parent involvement to child development and to both academic and social success of children in school. This applies to all grade levels and to programs that involve parents as tutors, as well as others where parents play a generally supportive role. Programs need not be extensive or costly to be successful.

In short, some of the benefits for students, suggests Harold Hester (1989), are:

- Academic achievement rises.
- Student behavior improves.
- Student motivation increases.
- Attendance becomes more regular.
- Student dropout rates are lower.
- Students have a more positive attitude toward homework.
- Parent and community support increases.

New studies also show, says Anne Henderson (1988):

1. If there's a strong component of parent involvement, it produces students who perform better than those in programs with less parent involvement.
2. Children whose parents are in touch with schools score higher than those children of similar aptitude and background whose parents aren't involved.
3. Parents who help their kids learn at home nurture in themselves and the children the attitudes that are crucial to achievement.
4. Children who are failing in school improve dramatically when parents are called in to help.

An example of one simple program took place in Chicago where 99 percent of the parents in forty-one classes signed a contract to provide work space at home for their child, to encourage and praise schoolwork, and to cooperate with the teacher to provide items needed for schoolwork. The result? Students in the program achieved twice the grade-level gain as those not participating (Jean Krasnow 1990).

Many of the research studies are based on inner-city schools with large populations of low-income and minority students. In Anne Henderson's update of *The Evidence Grows* (1987), the eighteen new studies, along with the thirty-five previous ones, place the conclusions beyond reach, she says.

The findings of all studies in her report were positive: parent involvement in any form appears to produce measurable gains in student achievement. "If school improvement effects are judged successful when they raise student achievement, Henderson (1988) says, "the research strongly suggests that involving parents can make a critical difference."

In addition, it's also important to note that the effects persist beyond short-term. For example, Henderson (1988) says studies show that low-income and minority graduates of preschool programs with high levels of parent involvement are still outperforming their peers when they reach senior high school—and at least one study shows results into college years.

For Parents

Parents get a greater appreciation of their important role in their children's education, a sense of adequacy and self-worth, strengthened social networks, and motivation to resume their own education, says Don Davies (1988).

Specifically, explains Hester, parents:

1. Receive ideas from the teacher or project coordinator on how to help their children
2. Learn more about the educational program and school system
3. Change their behavior at home to be more supportive of the child

But that's not all. States researcher Urie Bronfenbrenner:

> Not only do parents become more effective as parents, but they become more effective as people. It's a matter of higher self-esteem. Once they saw they could do something about their child's education, they saw they could do something about their housing, their community and their jobs. (Amundson 1988)

For Teachers and Schools

Joyce Epstein (1986) has shown that teachers discover that their lives are made easier if they get help from parents, and that parents who are involved tend to have more positive views of teachers. For instance, parents tend to rate teachers' interpersonal skills higher, appreciate teacher efforts, and rate teachers' abilities higher, says Hester.

From a parent survey in an article on teacher attitudes in the newsletter of the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools (1989), it was shown that "parents who are involved at home and at school say that the school has a more positive climate. Even more so, parents who perceive that the school is actively working to involve them say that the school is a good one."

Finally, involvement can also lead to feelings of ownership, which leads to increased support of schools, such as in greater political support and willingness to pay taxes to fund schools, which, as Davies (1988) suggests, are

What Works: Forms of Family Involvement

Little Contact with Schools

At present relatively few low-income and minority parents are involved in their children's schools. A federally sponsored poll of 25,000 parents in 1988 (Robert Rothman 1990) found that about half of all respondents had initiated contact with their children's schools about the students' academic performance. One-third reported having contacted their schools on academic progress.

Not surprisingly, the proportion of parents who had made such contacts varied according to income and education. Those with higher income and more years of schooling were more likely to initiate contact.

In the majority of schools in the three locales studied by Don Davies—Boston, Liverpool, and Portugal (all with low-income students)—little involvement from parents was found, regardless of social class. Most parents of low socioeconomic status, though, have little or no contact with the schools, Davies (1988) reported. And what contact they do have is negative: they only hear from the school when their child is in trouble.

The Hispanic Policy Development Project (Siobhan Nicolau and Carmen Lydia Ramos 1990) spent three years of research that led to two sobering findings:

1. That successful education requires that schools and families function as full partners in children's education.
2. That the interaction of poor Hispanic parents and the schools their children attended ranged from low to non-existent. They set out to discover why this crucial connection was so seldom made, resulting in the publication *Together Is Better: Building Strong Relationships Between Schools and Hispanic Parents* (Nicolau and Ramos).

Traditional Methods Don't Work

There are reasons why at-risk parents have so little involvement with their children's schools. For one thing, there are many barriers, misperceptions, and misunderstandings on both sides. A later chapter will deal with these barriers in more detail.

Another important reason, tied in with the above, is that traditional methods of parental involvement do not work with at-risk parents. Yet schools continue to use these traditional forms, which really are ways to involve middle-class parents, such as open houses, parent-teacher conferences, the PTA, and volunteer programs. This is not to say that the above examples won't work with at-risk parents, but they do have to be approached in a way that is compatible with each separate group.

Of course, part of this problem involves the history of American public schools and low-income or minority families. Traditionally, American public schools and middle-class parents have taken it for granted that there was continuity between home and school. Middle-class parents have assumed that schools will educate their children for successful roles in mainstream society, and educators have relied on middle-class parents to take an active role in socializing their children for school, as well as supporting the schools.

Socializing children for school has meant, according to Carol Ascher(1987):

1. Conveying the importance of education
2. Backing up teachers by making attendance, homework, and good grades a priority
3. Being willing to participate in school activities, such as the PTA

Not so with poor and minority parents. Their history with the school system has been quite

different. Generally, there has been suspicion and mistrust on both sides. What's happened is that

> at the same time as poor and minority parents have complained that the schools are not run to benefit their children, and that teachers do not welcome them, educators have lamented that exactly those parents, whose children tend to be low achievers and who most need extra help to achieve, have tended to be so burdened by their own lives that they are the hardest to reach. (Ascher)

Forms of Parent Involvement

There are several ways to look at the different types or forms of parent involvement, but mainly they're simply different phrases for different kinds of activities or roles. The questions is: What works for at-risk families?

Joyce Epstein's model is often used—and has been adopted by Davies (1989) in his Schools Reaching Out (SRO) projects—so her model, slightly adapted, will be used to include both the roles of each form of involvement and the goals for at-risk parents.

School Support for Families

Parents have basic obligations for their children's safety and health. Part of these obligations includes preparing their children for school, administering effective discipline, and providing positive conditions for learning and behavior.

The goal for at-risk families is to help them establish home environments that do all these things, including supporting learning.

However, at-risk parents often need help even with the basics, such as providing for their children's health needs. This is where human service agencies can link up with schools to offer family support services.

Parents as Learners

Being a parent is a huge responsibility; there is much that most parents—and particularly at-risk parents—must learn, if they are to effectively help with their children's education. So at-risk parents must also become learners.

This form of parent involvement includes attendance and participation at workshops that train and educate parents, such as in child development, parenting skills, or helping their children at home. The most effective parent education programs are those planned cooperatively by parents and school staff members.

The goal is to provide education that meets parents' needs and concerns, as well as the school's.

School-Family Communication

This represents communication from school to home about school programs and the child's progress (memos, conferences, home visits). For at-risk families, two-way communication—that is, communication from home to school—is also important.

The goal for schools is to make sure that all communication or information can be understood by all parents and also to design more effective ways of reaching these parents. Schools might

Ways Parents Can Be Involved

- Assist with homework and review assignments
- Consult with the teacher
- Assist with schedule planning
- Serve as a resource person
- Assist in the classroom
- Initiate conferences
- Provide study time and a good study environment
- Promote writing at home
- Provide educational resources
- Model appropriate skills and behaviors
- Blend education and family activities
- Talk about goals
- Post examples of good work
- Visit classes
- Reinforce skills
- Encourage improvement
- Praise good performance

bring home into school through use of parents in the classroom sharing songs and stories from their own culture, for instance.

Family Support of Schools and Teachers

This takes place at school, generally, and includes parents who assist teachers, administrators, or children in the classroom. It also includes parents who support the school's activities and who come to performances, sports events, and other activities.

Parents who volunteer or who come to school events help further communication between parents and teachers. Just their presence reinforces the importance of education to their children. This category could also include parents working with teachers in helping their children at home.

For at-risk parents, educators' goal is to make such activities nonthreatening and meaningful, so that parents will want to participate.

Helping Their Children at Home—Parents as Teachers

Former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett states: "Not every teacher is a parent, but every parent is a teacher" (Harold Hester 1989). We have seen that the power of parents to affect student achievement is considerable. If parents are involved in the education of their children, they once again give their children that all-important message, along with a positive example, that education is important.

This form of parent involvement has parents working at home with their children in learning activities. Can parents of at-risk students do this? Yes, Dorothy Rich (1985) says, a resounding yes. Head of the Home and School Institute, Rich has been devising "recipes" for home learning for over twenty-five years. In recent data, for example, 94 percent of the thirty-three migrant families in Tampa reported changes in their children's school performance as a result of parents' being taught to work with their children at home (Rich, personal communication May 27, 1990).

However, parents of at-risk students need ideas and instructions from teachers on how to monitor and assist children at home with learning activities that are coordinated with their homework. Including materials is also helpful. Most at-risk parents, when shown how, are anxious to help.

The goal, then, is to design, develop, and provide effective ideas on how parents can help their children at home—and to train parents to use instructional materials as needed.

Parent Participation in Decision-Making—Parents as Advocates

In this form of involvement, parents assume decision-making roles regarding school issues, problems, and programs. Parents might be part of the PTA, School Advisory Council, and other steering or decision-making groups; or they might be involved in planning events.

Empowerment is an important factor in designing parent involvement programs for at-risk parents. Family Matters at Cornell University stresses the importance of empowerment—that it is one of the keys to overcoming social class and cultural barriers in parental involvement in schools.

Low income parents, who so often feel a sense of exclusion and hopelessness, responded well, for instance, to decision-making participation in the Head Start program during its early years. Comer's SDP model, which has been replicated in over 100 schools throughout the country, has maximized parent involvement at the whole-school level. In fact, parental participation in decision-making and governance is a core part of the program and a key to its success.

However, at-risk parents are rarely involved at this stage, at least not in the beginning. But when they are ready, this can be an important form of involvement for some at-risk parents, such as blacks. It's not true that socially marginal parents aren't interested in having their voices heard in some way. (See page 22 for the results of a relevant survey cited by Slaughter and Kuehne).

The goal here is to decide how and when to recruit and train potential at-risk parent leaders.

Which Forms of Involvement Are Best?

Any way you look at it, parents have a number of roles to fulfill. There is debate, however, about the best ways to involve parents.

According to Epstein, different types of parent involvement seem to produce different results:

> For example, several studies show that when parents help their child at home in a particular study, it's likely to increase the student's achievement in that subject. By contrast, involving a few parents in decision-making on school committees probably won't increase student achievement, at least in the short term...a few volunteers at school won't help other parents know how to help their children at home. (Ron Brandt 1989)

Comer and Davies would both likely disagree that volunteers do not help student achievement, although they might agree that it's not in a direct, straight-forward way. Nevertheless, educators will want to be familiar with the different forms of parent involvement and decide what their goals are, what kinds of at-risk groups their school includes, and where they want to start.

Research doesn't show with any clarity what outcomes are associated with different forms of involvement. Ascher, for example, reports that there is little research on direct involvement of parents in the schools. Yet for parent involvement in home and community affairs, achievement is strong and positive (meaning the kids score higher).

Agreeing with Epstein, Ascher, reporting on a survey of 185 midwestern elementary principals, says that not all types of involvement make a difference: "While community support, fundraising, and attendance at school meetings were all highly correlated with achievement, citizen participation in policy decision-making was not."

On the other hand, having children score higher—that is, improving test and I.Q. scores—is not the sole reason for parent involvement.

Davies (1989) comments on James Comer's work with the SDP (School Development Program) schools:

> Comer has demonstrated that to improve urban schools, it is not enough to aim only at the intellectual and academic development of children—that their social, emotional, and physical development are inescapably linked to the intellectual.

Therefore, Comer's mental health team approach involves not only teachers, but also various specialists, parents, and community agencies. By improving "school climate," as well as by adding a new curriculum, SDP schools have helped at-risk children to achieve at a much higher social and academic level (Davies 1989).

Volunteering and Decision-Making

The areas of volunteering and decision-making or governance are the areas with the most controversy. As noted earlier, parents of at-risk children aren't likely to be found in most schools as volunteers.

A recent study published by the National Research Council found that public schools with high minority enrollments are less likely to use volunteers and attract fewer of them than suburban schools. Volunteers in most schools are more likely to be white, well educated, and middle class (Lynn Olson 1990). The same goes for those parents who are involved in decision-making and governance.

In thinking about forms of family involvement, consider first the comment by project coordinators actually working with at-risk parents—that you simply need to get them involved in some way, *any* way, say Nicolau and Ramos.

Using a Number of Entry Points

Perhaps O. Heleen's model (1988) is most appropriate for at-risk parents. He proposes nondirectional participation—that is, using a number of entry points that are appropriate to the family's level of skill, need, or investment of time or energy. For example, parental choice (of schools), though initially involving little participation, may lead to increased involvement. Or a contact through a mediating agency, such as a church group working for school support or a home visit program, may be the entry point into parent involvement for some families.

Heleen believes that family involvement can become a reality even with the hardest-to-reach families, if

> school systems develop a broad range of participatory opportunities that work cooperatively with parents and the community, allow parents to determine their own needs, provide initially low-investment opportunities, and work with other community structures.

Davies's advice echoes Heleen's. The SRO program offers a wide variety of styles and timing for both parent and community involvement and focuses on programs both inside and outside of the school. Jean Krasnow (1990) agrees that when the school provides many different sorts of activities, then parents can enter the school world in a way that is most comfortable or interesting to them.

Schools Must Take the Initiative

At-Risk Families Cannot Reach Out

What's more important: A parent's socioeconomic status or the parent involvement practices of the school? That the parent is a single mother and a high school dropout or school involvement practices? Says Kenneth Kamminger (1988):

> The data are clear that the school's practices to inform and to involve parents are more important than parent education, family size, marital status, and each grade level in determining whether inner-city parents get involved with their children's education in elementary school and stay involved through middle school.

That is, parents' level of involvement is directly linked to the specific practices of schools. Parents are more involved at school and at home when they see schools with strong parent involvement programs. Suzanne Ziegler (1987) emphasizes this when she says that as powerful as parental involvement is and as effective as parents can be as coeducators, many of them will never realize their potential (and hence neither will their children) unless schools and teachers reach out to them.

This is particularly important for at-risk parents. These parents, as has been pointed out, too often view schools as places where they are called to discuss problems, or places where they themselves failed, or institutions they fear or are in awe of. Also, the daily struggle to survive may make it impossible for them to reach out to a place that can't provide relief for their immediate needs.

Parent attitudes can change, it's true, but aren't likely to without intervention. So it is clear that the initiative *must* come from the schools. At-risk families can't do it. Don Davies has emphasized this in the name for his projects: Schools Reaching Out.

An Example of Teacher Initiative

To emphasize the difference teacher initiative can make, Ziegler shares an anecdote. She tells of two students, Jessica and Derek, who had problems with reading. Neither of the children's parents initiated contact with the school. As Derek's mother said, "Teachers should take all the initiative." During both years of the study, Derek's teachers phoned and sent notes home to his mother about his academic problems.

Jessica's mother, however, heard nothing from the school about Jessica's continuing problems—even when she was assigned to special education in third grade.

At the end of two years, Derek was reading well beyond grade level, while Jessica was still several years behind. Even though the authors allow there were other factors involved as well, Derek's teacher's communication with his mother seems to be a key to his dramatically improved reading ability.

At-Risk Families Are Interested

But will parents respond to a school's or teacher's initiative? Generally the answer is yes, but, of course, it depends on how the initiative is carried out.

While many parents depend on teacher initiative, says Ziegler, most parents are very responsive to positive expressions of interest and concern by teachers and will implement their suggestions. They may simply be waiting for direction and guidance. Many parents receive little communication, she adds, and may be apprehensive about asking for more: "But when teachers do reach out to involve parents, the response is great." She also notes that many surveys show that parents are eager for more information and teacher-initiated contact.

There is strong evidence, say Milbrey McLaughlin and Patrick Shields (1987), that low-income parents want to play a role in their

children's education. Parents who lack knowledge themselves do not necessarily lack interest in the school their children attend. What's lacking in most schools and school districts are appropriate strategies or structures for involving low-income parents.

What Should Schools Do?

"All parents, but particularly those who feel isolated and alienated, must be made to feel welcome in the schools if they are to assume greater responsibility for their children's educational outcomes," says Judith E. Jones (1989). "In many cases," she adds, "the parents of at-risk children need as much support as their children do. Schools have important roles to play here.

Some schools are reaching out in creative ways, like sponsoring events at the beginning of the school year, rather than at the end, planning social events and using school buses to get the parents there, and increasing the literacy of parents and children in joint programs.

Examples of School Initiative

Davies (1987) suggests several examples of what school initiative can mean for at-risk families:

1. Having adequately prepared and sensitive school representatives go into homes to meet with families
2. Having some meetings outside the school in settings less intimidating and more accessible to parents
3. Using natural and informal settings to reach and talk with parents (such as churches, markets, social centers)
4. Preparing materials in other languages for parents whose English proficiency is weak
5. Scheduling activities that are attuned to at-risk parents' needs

However, Derek Toomey (1986) points out that "the more parent participation is accepted and encouraged, the more *inequity* may result as enthusiastic parents come forward and the 'silent majority' remains silent." That's why he suggests that aggressive school outreach, including home visits, may be especially important to ethnic and language-minority families.

All Summed Up

In short, says James A. Sandfort (1987), schools need to:

- Change their belief systems about at-risk families.
- Admit that help is needed.
- Ask parents to become involved and take responsibility for their children's education.
- View an interested parent as a potential partner, not a problem.
- Communicate with parents, letting them know specifically what it is they must do.
- Begin at the top: the principal must be a catalyst. Develop and promote strong programs of parent involvement that involve administration and colleagues as well as individual teachers.

Barriers and Misunderstandings

"It is the parents of at-risk students who are often least likely to be involved with the school," states the New York State Department of Education (1988). However, for a variety of reasons, both parents and educators are responsible for this lack of involvement.

Some obstacles to involvement happen due to benign neglect, some due to political or professional barriers to keep parents out of the way, some due to emotional barriers felt by parents themselves—and some simply due to ignorance, lack of awareness, and misunderstandings.

Barriers for Parents

Feelings of inadequacy, failure, and poor self-worth

Many low-income parents have a low assessment of themselves and, consequently, feel insecure about their ability to be involved in their child's education either at home or at school. "They often see themselves as not being very smart, and many talk about how they did not do well at school, did not learn much, and were academic failures," says Don Davies (1988) in his report on low-income families in three locales.

He also reiterates that many of these parents have low expectations for themselves and their children, though they almost uniformly express strong interest in their children's education. Michelle Sarkees (1989) says some may feel they are unsuccessful parents and thus feel discouraged by what they consider to be personal failures.

Although most doubt their ability to become involved in their child's schooling, adds Davies (1989), many said they would like to learn more about how to help.

Negative attitudes or bad experiences with schools

Low-income parents, says Davies (1989), do not consider themselves hard to reach.

> They will come to school when asked for a good reason, but by and large they don't like to come on their own, and many—perhaps most—carry bad memories of schools and being intimidated by teachers and administrators. Most say they simply don't like to go to a school. (Davies 1989)

Siobhan Nicolau and Carmen Lydia Ramos (1990) add that many Hispanic parents may fear appearing ignorant ("I am called by the school when there is a problem with my son, then the teachers make me feel embarrassed and hurt about his behavior"). Or they may feel overwhelmed by educators ("I went to the third grade; how can I question my son's teacher?"), or intimidated by their own lack of success in school ("Teachers don't like me. I flunked school. Better for my kids if I stay away as much as possible").

Suspicion or anger that schools are not treating them equally

Many parents harbor bad feelings toward school, seeing themselves as pawns, not partners in public education. Sarkees says that some parents have developed a resistance to authority, often as the result of frustrations or concerns about previous educational experiences provided to their child. Thus they may be suspicious of parent education programs.

Blacks have a deep distrust of public schools, based on past discrimination. "Blacks may say they believe schools help people get ahead, but actually they do not buy the white middle-class folk theory of achievement through education," says John Ogbu, researcher at the University of California (M. Sandra Reeves 1988).

James Comer illustrates this mistrust by relating the experience of one first-grade teacher in New Haven on the first day of school: "A six-

year-old raised his hand, as instructed by his teacher, and said, 'Teacher, my mama said I don't have to do anything you say'" (Reeves).

Carol Ascher (1987) says that parents of poor and minority kids often are suspicious of school for teaching subjects whose importance they don't understand, or more commonly, for "cheating their children of the same quality of education that they believe middle-class children receive."

Leave it to the schools

Many low-income parents, as well as those from other cultures, see schools as authority figures and leave it to the school to educate their children. Annette Lareau (1987) found that low socioeconomic parents, who also lack educational skills, separated themselves from their children's education. These parents perceived education as the teacher's job, not the parent's.

Cultural and language barriers

Nicolau and Ramos list reasons for barriers between Hispanics and schools, including a lack of understanding of U.S. education and a tradition of not questioning schools or teachers. Parents said things like, "They know what is best for my children," or "I want to be correct but nobody tells me what is correct here," or "They say if we cannot speak English, there is no point in wanting to see the principal or counselors."

Economic, emotional, or time constraints

Often excessive energy is required to meet the family's basic needs. Many are struggling simply to survive.

> It is not reasonable to expect that individuals who are barely surviving will have the time, the inclination, or the psychic energy to get themselves together for a school meeting or a workshop. It is clear that most cannot help their children until they have gotten help for their own all-consuming problems. (Nicolau and Ramos 1990)

Or as Ascher puts it: "A welfare client may have the time to come to school, but may not have the emotional or spiritual resources to do so."

Logistical problems: child care, transportation, scheduling.

There are logistical problems and needs, too. Often both parents work, sometimes at more than one job. Mothers may be single and on welfare and have a number of children to care for. As one Hispanic parent put it, "My husband, he works two jobs and I have two babies. We got no time to go to school" (Nicolau and Ramos).

Child care may be nonexistent or too expensive—and the same goes for transportation. Working parents can't attend meetings in the day, and single parents often choose to spend time with their children in the evening rather than go to a school event.

"Unless this mismatch in schedules can be overcome," the 1987 Metropolitan Life survey noted, "there remains a need for working parents to occasionally take time off from work, or else forego direct contact with teachers" (L. Harris 1987).

Barriers for Schools and Teachers

Commitment to parent involvement

A number of school practices have discouraged or completely blocked any parent participation, says the National School Boards Association (Amundson 1988): "First, although most school officials say they want parent participation, in practice they offer parents only limited opportunities for involvement."

Parent involvement can't be effective, many experts say, if educators continue to use it as a supplement rather than incorporate it into the mainstream of education. It is the difference between looking at parents as extras and looking at them as partners.

> Teachers frequently ask, "How do I get involved? How do I get them to attend meetings?" But the real question that each teacher needs to ask is, "Do I really want to involve the parents?" Only when the answer is an unqualified "yes" will the means to do this become feasible. (Mildred B. Smith 1970)

Confusion about the role of teachers

Both teachers and parents have stereotyped images of each other, says Suzanne Ziegler (1987), that stem from childhood experiences and guide their views about schooling. Teachers, for instance, report that they feel uncertain about how to involve parents and still maintain their role as experts.

At the root of conflict between teachers and parents is their often differing views on parent involvement. A 1985 survey by the National PTA, cited in the National School Boards Association report (Amundson 1988), found that about three-fourths of the parents surveyed said they were interested in attending classes and workshops with teachers and principals, as well as serving as advocates for their school in meetings with the school board or on advisory committees. School administrators, on the other hand, said they did not want parents participating as advocates.

In other words, teachers seem to see the parental role as minimally supportive, traditional, and perhaps passive, say Diana T. Slaughter and Valerie Shahariw Kuehne (1988). The proper role for parents, according to teachers, is home-based.

Parents, however, add Slaughter and Kuehne, express interest in more active roles—in being colearners with their children, functioning as advocates, and participating in decision-making.

Not too many years ago, says Dorothy Rich (1987), parents were told "hands off, you don't know what you're doing" in regard to their children's education. But today, she stresses, the message must be "hands on."

Concerns about turf and territory

Some teachers are worried that parents will undermine their authority and disrupt their classrooms. Rhoda Becher (1984) points to a report by the National Education Association stating that teachers express concern that parents will try to take over their teaching responsibilities and won't follow the teacher's instructions and school regulations.

They are also concerned that parents will cause confusion and disrupt the classroom because they do not know how to work productively with children. And they're worried that parents may use nonstandard English or demonstrate other characteristics that teachers do not want in the classroom.

Doubts about their abilities to work with at-risk parents

Many teachers profess doubt about whether certain parents are willing or able to be involved in helping their children, such as working-class parents, non-English speaking parents, immigrant parents, single parents—the list is long.

But it's been found that teachers learn by doing, says Ziegler. Those who take the initiative in reaching out don't seem to be defeated by these barriers, but instead have been able to work successfully with parents of all educational backgrounds.

Epstein (1983) confirms this, noting that some teachers had worked out successful practices to use with parents who had less than a high school diploma. Other teachers did not know how to involve the less-educated parents and thus claimed these parents lacked the ability or willingness to help.

But it is true that teachers receive little or no training in working with parents. Preservice training for teachers and administrators devotes minimal, if any, time to relationships between families and schools. Therefore, says Jane C. Lindle (1990), many teachers find they're ill-prepared for meeting parental expectations or ascertaining their needs.

Not only, then, do teachers have reservations about whether they can motivate at-risk parents, but they also report they do not know *how* to initiate or accomplish such a program.

A belief that at-risk parents do not care and will not keep commitments

Perceptions about "the other side" being uncaring only heighten the distance between parents and teachers. Such images can lead to an unproductive, escalating cycle of mutual blame.

Many teachers tend to ignore poor and minority parents, assuming that less-educated parents don't want to become involved in their children's education. But recent research refutes this assumption. Studies of poor and minority parents in Maryland, New England, and the Southwest have found that these parents care

deeply about their children's education, but may not know how to help (Reeves). "We poor parents have dreams for our children's future," says Susie Smith, a resident in a Chicago public-housing project. "Education is crucial to us; it is our kids' only legal ticket to a better life" (Reeves).

In a survey reported by the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools (CREMS), 171 teachers in eight urban inner-city elementary and middle schools generally agreed that most parents of their students are not involved with the school and don't want to be. But when the approximately 2,300 parents of those students were surveyed, they agreed only in part. Yes, they often weren't involved. Many work full-time or have other reasons why they could not come to the building during the day.

But this does not mean they don't *want* to be involved. For one thing, many said they had not been asked. And the parents in all these schools are "emphatic about wanting the schools and teachers to advise them about how to help their children at home."

Henry Becker and Joyce Epstein (1982) found that a great deal has to do with teacher attitudes. They say that general guidance and modest efforts directed to parents had significant results:

> Thus, whether parents with little schooling are viewed by the teachers as capable of assisting their children in reading at home may depend on whether the teacher has worked out procedures and communication patterns that would enable parents with little schooling to assist.

Low teacher expectations for at-risk children

Related to teacher attitudes and behavior is many teachers' standard view of what constitutes a "good" family and proper childrearing. "Children from families who deviate from these middle-class norms," says Davies (1988), "are expected by many educators to have trouble in school—to be behavior problems and low achievers."

For example, one teacher said, "As soon as I saw and talked to the mother, I knew that boy would fail." Another teacher said, "Well, what can you expect of these children. We do the best we can, but look at the homes they come from" (Davies 1988).

In their study of urban schools, the Carnegie Foundation found that more than one out of five teachers simply do not believe that all students can learn. These teachers' low expectations, they concluded, became a self-fulfilling prophecy (Reeves).

Schools assume a passive role or are unwelcome

Epstein asserts:

> If schools don't work to involve parents, then parent education and family social class are very important for deciding who becomes involved. But if schools take parent involvement seriously, and want to involve all parents, then social class and parents' level of education decrease or disappear as important factors. (Brandt 1989)

Based on her research, Epstein (1989) speculates that only a relatively small percentage of parents have personal problems so severe that they cannot work cooperatively with teachers, given the proper assistance.

In the CREMS survey, many of the 2,300 parents reported that they had not been asked by the school to become volunteers or to help. Nor have many parents been given specific directions.

In a speech to school administrators, reports Jean Krasnow (1990), "one of the Hispanic parents working in the project explained that it was not so much that everyone in her daughter's school needed to speak Spanish, but rather that when she entered the building there was a welcoming attitude."

Working parents and single parents need activities that are scheduled at times they can come, not at times that are convenient simply to the teachers and school. As indicated in the parents' section, at-risk families need such extras as child care, transportation, and possibly meals. Something seemingly as insignificant as lack of child care can contribute to parents' not being receptive to participating in school events.

Communication from schools focuses on the negative

Communication between the schools and low socioeconomic parents is primarily negative, focused largely on academic and behavioral problems of children, says Davies (1988).

Research shows, says Lindle, that most teachers don't contact parents unless there is a problem:

> In this situation, parents find themselves dealing with a stranger, the teacher.... Furthermore, because they probably have had no contact with the teacher until this point, parents feel no desire to support the teacher, a stranger, over the interests of their child.

Many teachers also overestimate the contacts they do have with parents, whether negative or positive. Surprisingly, large numbers of parents are excluded from some of the most common communications from school. Epstein noted in one survey that over one-third of the parents reported that they had no conference with the teacher during the year, and almost two-thirds never talked with a teacher by phone (Amundson 1988).

Dwelling on the hard-to-reach concept

Davies (1988) says many teachers dwell on family problems and conditions, such as crime and poor living conditions, and talk little about the strengths all families have. They label these parents "hard-to-reach" because of their home and neighborhood environment and the parents' characteristics; "parent apathy is a recurring theme."

Unfortunately, Davies says, only a minority of educators talk about the possibility that school policies or educator attitudes may be part of the problem.

Davies (1988) says there is something flawed about the hard-to-reach concept: "Most of the parents in our study were 'reachable,' but the schools were either not trying to involve them or were not knowledgeable about, or sensitive to ways to overcome barriers of culture, class, or language."

Overcoming Barriers: New Beliefs and Principles

Several programs that involve the families of at-risk students have achieved success by replacing old beliefs and assumptions with new ones. There are also certain principles around which effective at-risk family involvement programs are based. The following "new beliefs" result from the work of Rhoda Becher, Don Davies, and the Family Matters program at Cornell University.

New Beliefs about Parents and Families

All families have strengths

Parents, says Rhoda Becher (1984), already make contributions to their children's education. Successful programs emphasize the strengths of parents and let them know these strengths are valued.

They also build on the particular assets that many poor and minority families have. For instance, these families are usually more group-oriented and interactive than the white middle class (which stresses individualism and competition)—and it's exactly these collaborative skills that the labor market needs today.

Sue Berryman, director of the National Center on Education and Employment at Teachers College, Columbia University, says there is a second school reform waiting in the wings, one that "will be organized in some way around a much fuller definition of human talent than narrowly defined academic achievement skills" (M. Sandra Reeves 1988). This will be so, she says, not only because the economy needs a wider range of skills, but also because at-risk families may bring a greater diversity of talents to us. Some of the talents these groups have are in spatial relationships, physical coordination, music, interpersonal perceptiveness, and inner attunement.

Parents can learn new techniques

Successful programs help parents identify what new things they're capable of doing, says Becher. This perspective also suggests that parents have both the ability and interest to expand their parenting strategies and techniques. An aim of successful programs is to help families overcome obstacles to effective functioning—and one way to do this is by teaching them new skills and behaviors.

Parents have important perspectives about their children

Successful programs recognize and draw on the perspective and knowledge that parents have about their children. Teachers realize that parents can be important and useful in helping them improve children's education.

Most parents really care about their children

Successful programs acknowledge and express a sincere belief that most parents really care about their kids. This has been demonstrated over and over by parents' comments.

Of course, there are families struggling with multiple problems. As Diana T. Slaughter and Valerie Shahariw Kuehne (1988) point out, "Generally, under impoverished conditions, many families are considerably more survival-oriented than child-oriented, although for many adults their children are their most precious possessions."

Cultural differences are both valid and valuable

"Diversity is not a disease to be cured or an aberration to be stamped out by the experts," says Don Davies (1988). Successful programs learn about other cultures and respect their beliefs. They find ways of building on the loyalty and obedience, for example, that Hispanic parents

instill in their children. Or they find ways to bring other cultures' traditions and values into the classroom.

Many family forms exist and are legitimate

There is no single pattern, says Davies (1988), that determines healthy child and family development. Yet the number and types of resources that parents can marshal can be a key factor. In cases where children are cared for by grandparents, stepparents, or other members of an extended family, successful programs are prepared to reach out and provide family support where resources are limited.

New Principles for Programs

These principles for involvement of parents of at-risk students come mainly from the work of Don Davies (based also on the Family Matters program at Cornell University), as well as various other experts.

The No-Fault Model

As we've seen, there are misunderstandings and obstacles on both sides, and blaming each other—parents or teachers—only stands in the way of developing genuine partnerships. Teachers have new things to learn as well as parents. But then teachers, like parents, also need support. When you're beginning a program for at-risk families, proceed from the premise that it's not any single person's or group's fault that a child or group of children is having difficulties learning. Nor is it the school's fault. We are all responsible and interdependent on each other.

A Non-Deficit Approach

This means that it is not helpful or accurate to view at-risk families as deficient or failures. Nor is it useful to look down on any family, talk down to them or "at" them, or regard them in a patronizing way. Respect families for who they are—and look for assets or strengths.

The Importance of Empowerment

All individuals and families need to feel empowered, especially at-risk families who so often feel powerless. *Empowerment* has been defined by V. Vanderslice (1984) as a process through which people become more able to influence those people and organizations that affect their lives, as well as the lives of those they care about. Moncrieff Cochran and Charles R. Henderson, Jr. (1986) link empowerment to helping individuals remove obstacles that impede their efforts to achieve equal status in society.

Anything you can do to help at-risk families have more control over their lives—and their children's education—will be helpful. James Comer (1988) and others suggest this is especially true for African Americans.

An Ecological Approach

We live in an interdependent world today, no doubt about it. A child's world is linked to the family, which is linked to the neighborhood or community, plus to the child's school. And each of these influences the other. Family involvement in the school can have an impact both within the family and on the community in which the family lives. For example, if parent involvement results in an unemployed mother gaining the self-confidence to get a job, that job will then affect her need for child care. Further, her employment may affect her ability to be as involved as she was before in school activities. We need to see all the connections in a child's world.

Collaboration: The Only Way

Partnership with at-risk families is impossible without collaboration, both within the school and outside it. Schools alone can't provide all the services that at-risk families need, such as parenting education, counseling, health care, housing, and so forth.

The school staff also need to function in a collaborative way with one another in order for real change to occur, believes Jean Krasnow (1990). It's asking too much for a single teacher to do it alone, just as it's asking too much for schools to provide all the help and resources that at-risk students and families need.

We know now that the community and schools *must* work together to achieve successful parent involvement programs for at-risk families. (See Janet E. Levy [1989] for examples and ideas.)

Conclusion

Changes Needed

"The reforms of the last five years may pale against the requirements of the next 10," says the statement on at-risk students from the Forum of Educational Organization Leaders. "In fact, many predict that the task will require nothing short of a fundamental reordering of the institution called school" (M. Sandra Reeves 1988). Some of this restructuring will necessitate links with the larger community, including parents, and additional care-giving by schools.

And it will require more money. "Any plan for major improvements in the development and education of disadvantaged children that does not recognize the need for additional resources over a sustained period is doomed to failure," says Reeves. That includes money specifically for parent involvement programs with at-risk families. Seen in a larger scope, Don Davies reminds us of several points worth remembering when developing programs for at-risk families and the schools:

Organizational change is a gradual process

School reform requires changes of everyone, not just teachers, administrators, and families, but of communities and social service agencies. Change in the school structure as a whole is often a difficult dilemma.

Davies (1989) points out that his Schools Reaching Out (SRO) project builds high expectations on the part of teachers and policymakers for change and dramatic results. Yet urban schools are often plagued by poor conditions, skepticism that new ideas will work, bureaucratic and financial constraints, as well as the lethargy of tradition and suspicion about change.

Organizational change requires collaboration

Davies says (in a preface to Jean Krasnow 1990) that school reform should be seen as "a slow, collaborative developmental process." He adds that for schools to change in their ability to share the responsibility for children's development with families—and especially at-risk families and communities—individuals must become more connected to one another. Thus collaboration between schools and other community and human service agencies is necessary to help at-risk children and their families.

Outside pressure and organization are needed for change to occur

Otherwise, says Davies (1989), the built-in inertia of the school system is likely to defeat change. By outside pressure he's talking about change in the form of laws, mandates, citizen protests, and citizen organizations demanding change.

"Without public dissatisfaction," he emphasizes, "politicians are unlikely to make substantial shifts in the allocation of public resources. This points to the need for...work outside the schools by grassroots parent and community organizations to press for school reform and improved results." He also stresses that this has to be citizen-initiated and controlled, not dependent on the support or financing of school officials.

Parent involvement with at-risk families must not be seen as an end in itself or the only component

Davies's nightmare (1989) is that advocates of parent involvement will succeed too well, that there will be an upswell of interest, books, and reports—and also perhaps activities in the schools—and yet 5 or 35 percent of our children will still be failing and leaving school ill-prepared.

"The point is," he maintains, "that parent involvement should not be viewed in any way other than as one of many needed connections between schools, families, and communities which might contribute to social and academic success for all children."

Is It Worth The Effort?

Well, the Hispanic Policy Development Project certainly concluded it was. (Siobhan Nicolau and Carmen Lydia Ramos 1990)

They found that parents who became involved and attended school activities became familiar with the school system; their discomfort and fear then evaporated and they began to feel they belonged. With this belonging, they became more deeply involved in their children's education. "The involved parents," say Nicolau and Ramos, "repeatedly remarked how good it felt to be able to help their children learn."

Project coordinators noted some of the changes they saw in the attitude and behavior of parents. For instance, more parents telephoned schools to make inquiries and ask for homework assistance with their children. Parents no longer visited the school only when their kids were in trouble but began dropping by to share problems, express concerns, or ask for advice—and they no longer waited to be asked to come in. Many initiated visits and communication with teachers.

Parents said they felt more self-confident in general and felt appreciated by the school staff. Some requested additional activities (such as education training for their husbands, relatives, and friends). These are indeed wonderful changes in these once reluctant parents!

Schools reaped benefits as well. These changes enabled teachers to do their jobs better. They learned how to communicate cross-culturally and found that doing things in new ways need not be threatening. The ultimate satisfaction, of course, was that teachers experienced that the students were *learning*!

Nicolau and Ramos conclude with a quote from Justice Holmes, which they said suggested what these school/parent partnerships discovered. "As the mind, once expanded..., never returns to its original size," said Holmes, so Hispanic parents, once exposed to school involvement, never revert to their original ways of thinking. They begin to alter their parenting styles, which is greatly encouraging for their children's success.

Isn't that progress? And isn't that worth, in addition to the changes in parents and children, the time, patience, and creativity that must go into such a partnership?

In her report written on the project, Jean Krasnow (1990) concludes with an encouraging comment about the difficulties and rewards of involving at-risk families as partners with the schools:

> As desirable as it may seem, it may not be necessary for everyone in the school to accept and support a new vision for responsibility of children's nurture and education. Administrative support, some teachers trying new practices and sharing their results, some parents actively involved and actively recruiting more, and the beginning of a joint planning effort would reflect real change.

Appendix: Organizations Concerned with At-Risk Families

ASPIRA: Hispanic Community Mobilization for Dropout Prevention (Janie Petrovich, National Executive Director), ASPIRA Association, Inc., National Office, 1112 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. (202) 835-3600. ASPIRA focuses on creating community awareness and providing practical information to Hispanic parents to help them be more effective participants in their children's education.

Hispanic Policy Development Project (Siobhan Nicolau, President), 250 Park Avenue South, Suite 500A, New York, NY 10003. (212) 529-9323. HPDP has published the booklet *Together Is Better: Building Strong Partnerships Between Schools and Hispanic Parents* and also has an appealing pamphlet for Hispanic parents (with one page in English, one in Spanish).

The Home and School Institute, Inc., (Dorothy Rich, President), Special Projects Office, Suite 228, 1201 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. (202) 466-3633. Offers publications and help on how parents can get involved in their children's education; has had success in working with at-risk families.

Institute for Responsive Education (Don Davies, President), 605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215. (617) 353-3309. IRE is a nonprofit public interest organization that is studying new approaches to improving relations among schools, parents, and the community. Publishes reports, handbooks, and other publications, including the magazine *Equity and Choice*.

National Committee for Citizens in Education (Carl Marburger and William Rioux, Codirectors), 10840 Little Patuxent Parkway, Suite 301, Columbia, MD 21044. (301) 997-9300. NCCE seeks to improve public education for all children through increased involvement of parents and citizens in the community.

National Research Center on Families, Communities, and Children's Learning (Don Davies and Joyce Epstein, Codirectors), Boston University, 605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215. (617) 353-3309. Funded in 1990 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the center will carry out research in family involvement and related issues.

The National Rural Development Institute (Doris Helge, Executive Director), Western Washington University, Miller Hall 359, Bellingham, WA 98225. (206) 676-3576. The institute has recently published a study, *The National Study Regarding Rural, Suburban, and Urban At-Risk Students*, which shows that rural children are more likely to be at risk than their counterparts in cities and suburbs.

Tucson Dropout Prevention Collaborative (Ralph Chavez, Coordinator), TUSD Starr Center, 102 N. Plumer, Tucson, AZ 85719. (602) 798-2047. The Tucson Dropout Prevention Collaborative functions as an advisory board to the district's dropout prevention coordinator.

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